

Representation of Armenian Female Artists of the 20th Century in Contemporary Armenia

by

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## **Abstract**

20th century Armenian art history is rich with names, yet the great majority of these names belong to men. One of the most evident examples showing the lack of female artists is The National Gallery of Armenia. Being one of the biggest narrators of the country's art history, the Gallery exhibits Armenian artists with a huge imbalance in the ratio of men to women. This research study aimed to find possible reasons behind this issue and also see what part the Soviet era played in it. To do so I applied methods of qualitative research and referred to research creation. Among my findings was the fact that there has been an abundance of Armenian female artists in the 20th century. With the challenges that came with the Soviet revolution and socialist propaganda, many women still had the opportunity to receive education in arts and pursue their careers. Despite this, the presence of gender-based canonical exclusion is present in Armenia today. To share about the issue, I created a digital art installation (as part of my capstone project) that stands as a platform for a public discourse on the subject matter.

## **Representation of Armenian Female Artists of the 20th Century in Contemporary Armenia**

I came across the issue of the lack of representation of Armenian women artists by reflecting on my own knowledge. I realized I could barely name a few artists only, though I wasn't sure why. After a cursory research I found out about the existence of many Armenian women who created art during the Soviet period. It was still unclear to me however, why many people are not informed about these women, at least on the level of general education. This is why I decided to focus my capstone research on addressing the questions of lack of representation of 20th century Armenian female artists in contemporary Armenian art history.

I applied qualitative methods of research to address my questions and concluded the project with a research creation piece. I first referred to literature to study the larger more global image of the lack of women in arts and then localized the problem to Armenian reality. Starting with the renowned texts of feminist art historians Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock, I set the background on gender-based discrimination in the field of arts. The study of canonical exclusion and women's rights in art education was followed by the examination of the archetype of a 'creative genius'. Gradually localizing the issue, I studied texts on the effects of the Soviet era on the social and personal lives of Armenian women. Narrowing down even more, I concluded my literature review with articles on prominent Armenian women artists, looking for common patterns among those women who are more or less known to the public.

Despite my focus on qualitative methods, I also wanted to see the representation of the 'greatest' Armenian artists in contemporary Armenia. After my several attempts to retrieve data were left unanswered by the director of the National Gallery of Armenia, I was left to draw

approximate information from their official website which showed an evident gender imbalance in the representation of the artists.

I concluded my research with a digital art installation to create a discourse around the issue of gender-based selective representation of 20th century artists in contemporary Armenian society. The issue is relevant and requires fundamental changes in choices made by state galleries and museums as well as the curricula of educational institutions.

### **Literature Review**

Is the lack of knowledge about 20th-century Armenian female artists in contemporary Armenia a result of canonical exclusionary practices? Can we possibly rediscover women as “great” as Saryan and Minas or shall we apply the belief of the art historian Linda Nochlin (in their complete absence) to the art history of Armenia (Nochlin, 1971)? To try and answer these questions I first studied the reasons behind the global scarcity of female names in the history of art. Starting with Linda Nochlin’s essay and proceeding with Griselda Pollock’s writings on the concept of canon I started filling in the gaps. One cannot talk about art history without defining the notion of the “creative genius” and its gendered nature which Dianna Miller does in her essay (2016). Further literature helped me use the lens of the global issue to look at Armenian women artists of the past. Svetlana Aslanyan’s chapter on women’s social identity in Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia (2005) created a foundation to then examine particularly women artists in the country.

#### **“Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”**

American art historian Linda Nochlin’s essay “Why have there been no great women artists?” (1971) is known to be one of the fundamental works of feminist art history. Nochlin begins her essay by arguing against the efficiency of feminists’ immediate reaction to the

absence of “great” female artists. According to her, feminists should not try to discover women who haven’t been spoken about or whose art hasn’t been preserved, though it is worth the effort. On the contrary, Nochlin pursues the importance of accepting that there have been no equals to Picaso and Rembrandt and proceeds to give reasons to why it is so (Nochlin, 1971). Her exceptional approach in the 20th century, also molded my way of questioning the scarcity of female names in Armenian art history.

At the beginning of her essay, Nochlin clarifies what art is and what it isn’t. According to her, great art is never the personal expression of individual oppression or a translation of personal life into visual terms. She gives huge importance to learning and practicing certain conventions, schemata or systems of notion when it comes to art creation (Nochlin, p. 4, 1971). Though theoretical and technical skill-development is still an integral part of art education these days, it is hard to agree with Nochlin on what art isn’t. Following her logical thread, most of the pieces exhibited in modern art museums today should not be labeled as art. In the contemporary reality, many artists use unconventional mediums and self-developed techniques. The purpose of art has undoubtedly evolved since the 19th century, and it is oftentimes THE “personal expression of individual emotional experience”, opposing Nochlin’s idea from the 70’s (Nochlin, 1971, p. 4).

“The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education--education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals” (Nochlin, 1971, p. 6). Nochlin argues that the process of art creation and the development of an artist is highly influenced by the social institutions based on what they legally forbid or encourage different groups of people. In 1893, women were prohibited from life drawing nude

models in The Royal Academy in London. It should be no surprise that the majority if not all skilled history painters would be male just because they had access to education. With history painting being the highest category of art, women had to limit themselves to other, less popular subjects for painting (Nochlin, 1971, p.12-13). This is only one of the examples brought by Nochlin, on how women were given little opportunity, if any, in major Academic institutions where a number of prominent male artists set the beginning of their artistic careers from. It is important to note that the author's central statement shouldn't be viewed as against giving a platform to those women that managed to create art despite the challenges. By saying there have been no female equals to the biggest names in art history, Linda Nochlin does not exclude the possible existence of women who, be it through self-practice or any other method of self-education, were able to reach the technical level of the men who now predominantly occupy the canon. I believe that this lack of emphasis, towards the importance of seeking out unknown female artists is not so much about her lack of belief that they exist, but instead it is about pushing the boundaries of many contemporary art galleries, educational institutions and their curricula. Finding out about women that have been neglected in the past, does not decrease the chance of female artists of the present being neglected in the future. Therefore, a more fundamental reformation needs to take place.

Apart from the lack of access to education for women, Nochlin touches upon the notion of having "Genius" and the privilege of being the son of a male art professor. She argues against the uncritical yet traditional assumption of "great" artists having this otherworldly, "mysterious power" that is not obtained through education, but instead embedded in them. Nochlin writes that the profession of art history itself has for a long time been largely based upon this romanticized idea of having the "genius", as seen in a number of art history writings (Nochlin, 1971, p. 7).

Picasso undoubtedly stood out from his fellow candidates by passing his entrance examination for both Barcelona and Madrid Academies of Art while being only fifteen years old. But a more critical approach questions why many other young students with similar qualifications ended up being mediocre artists in their adulthood. This is where the role of a father (who is an art professor) comes into play. It is of great importance to investigate the families which most of the great artists came from. As the studies have shown, most of them came from families where a relative or a direct member of the family was an artist or engaged in a related profession. The transmission of the artistic skill from father to son was a common practice following an unwritten law. Additionally, sons of academicians had to pay no fees for lessons. The number of world-famous painters or sculptors coming from artist-families is more than one might imagine (Nochlin, 1971, p. 9-10).

Nochlin's observation of the image of "lady painter" is no less fascinating. Etiquette books and literature of the 19th century had established an idea which suggested that a woman artist was in fact a modest, proficient and "self-demeaning" amateur (Nochlin, 1971, p. 15). This was thought and taught to be the extent of her artistic accomplishment, since she would naturally be more willing to dedicate her time to the well-being of others, her husband and family. "The "real" work of women is only that which directly or indirectly serves the family; any other commitment falls under the rubric of diversion, selfishness, egomania, or, at the unspoken extreme, castration" (Nochlin, 1971, p. 17). Serious dedication to art was viewed as being equal to giving up love or marriage, it was either one or the other. Delacroix, Courbet, Degas and van Gogh serve as examples of successful artists who either partly or fully gave up their family life to pursue their professional fulfillment, yet did not get restrained from the delight of



companionship or sex as a result of their choice (Nochlin, 1971, p. 17). It is easy to imagine the torrent of guilt and judgment that would pour over a woman following the same footsteps.

Reading the essay for the first time I became curious to find out argumentations explaining the fact that a few women did in fact make it into the canon, though not viewed as equals to the “geniuses”. In her segment titled *Successes*, Nochlin brings up characteristics that are common among most if not all successful women artists. Artemisia Gentileschi and Angelica Kauffmann are only two of the many acclaimed female artists all of whom, almost without exception, had an artist father or had a close personal connection with a dominant male artist. Another trait shared by successful women is “a good strong streak of rebellion” (Nochlin, 1971, p. 19). Nochlin states that being rebellious, these women still had to adopt “masculine” qualities of being single-minded, tenacious and devoted to ideas and craftsmanship in order to succeed in the world of art (Nochlin, 1971, p. 19).

### ***Differencing the Canon***

The lack or absence of art education for women is undoubtedly one of the leading reasons behind the scarcity of their names in the canon today, but as previously mentioned, this should not lead to the complete elimination of great women artists from the past. Gender-based canonical exclusion was and still is a relevant discourse. I referred to the book *Differencing the Canon* from 1999, to address what the canon is. In her chapter “About Canons and Cultural Wars”, art historian and cultural analyst, Griselda Pollock introduces the idea of fluctuation in taste when it comes to art. This is the reason why many artists (once despised) became prominent figures after their death. No less engaging was the writer’s perception of ‘tradition’, its origins and impact on what is viewed to be natural in social settings (Pollock, 1999). The above-mentioned ideas retrieved from the major work of Pollock, greatly contributed to my

perception and analyses of the Soviet and post-Soviet Armenian art canon, its canonical exclusions and what is/was established as ‘common sense’.

“The canon signifies what academic institutions establish as the best, the most representative, and the most significant text - or objects - in literature, art history or music”, (Pollock, 1999, p. 34). As harmless as the definition might appear, issues in form of discrimination and gender-based and minority exclusions are lying underneath it, thus leading to the rise of several questions. Who are these academic institutions comprised of and what are their criteria for both inclusion and exclusion? Are these established standards in arts reflective of a society or do they dictate what should be viewed as natural? Pollock suggests that canons of different cultural disciplines determine what is “unquestionably great”. It also dictates what must be studied by those who aspire to be like the ones in the canon, therefore holding the authority for labeling people as ‘educated’ (Pollock, 1999, p. 34). She later adds that the canon is “a discursive formation” which authenticates its chosen works as outcomes of “artistic mastery”, thus associating white male exclusive identification with creative work and culture in large. Studying art through this canonical lens means to accept masculinity as the power that is parallel to ‘truth’ and ‘beauty’. To be part of this ‘beautiful’ and to enter this discourse, feminists have to confirm this masculine power (Pollock, 1999, p. 40). Accordingly, a possible way to fight against canonical exclusions is to abolish existing canons and argue for the equal significance of all arts (Pollock, 1999, p. 37).

The criteria of the canon itself are never constant. In fact, it self-contradicts at certain times in art history. Pollock brings the example of Rembrandt, who despite being acknowledged as a great religious and spiritual painter in the nineteenth century, used to be viewed as a “sloppy painter of low subjects” in the eighteenth century (Pollock, 1999, p. 34). What is at times

considered to be a masterpiece is the work of a genius who “has made his individual experience universal” (Pollock, 1999, p. 35). The canonical patterns are deeply rooted and preserved by museums and university curricula. What the society sees in galleries and is taught in art history class as being the standard and the necessary, reinforces canonicity.

Speaking of standards, it is important to examine the idea of ‘tradition’. Pollock describes it as canon’s ‘natural’ face. *Hegemony*, unlike violent social or political discrimination, infuses society with its order in such an intelligent way that people undoubtedly accept it as ‘common sense’. With this method, white, male power was viewed as the ‘natural’ and ‘traditional’ and because of the inherent nature of tradition, whatever came from the past identified the values of the present. Tradition conceals its practices of selective inclusion thus letting the present-day tradition makers hide their practices of selective exclusion. Unfortunately, early experience shows that comprehensive representation of artists is not the best way to fight the imbalance, because what goes against tradition is not always easily perceived as natural. Respectively, activism should focus on the practices of museums, galleries and institutions as well as on how the white heterosexual male dominance is established and suggested as ‘common sense’ (Pollock, 1999, pp. 41-42). This method, brought by Pollock, gave an insight to determine if the current Armenian society reacts to the issue of canonical exclusion and how effectively if so.

### **“Gender and the Artist Archetype: Understanding Gender Inequality in Artistic Careers”**

Canonical exclusion and selective inclusion are issues that discriminate against proficient female artists, but these women face challenges even on their path towards accomplishment. In her article “Gender and the Artist Archetype: Understanding Gender Inequality in Artistic Careers”, Diana L. Miller (2016) studies the image of an ‘ideal-typical’ artist, also known as the creative genius. Miller identifies three ways in which the image of a successful artist is built on a

masculine model. First, the abstract worker is argued to be a man, as jobs, organizations and hierarchies require workers with gendered practices and characteristics. Secondly, entrepreneurial practices needed for an artist privilege men since they are more socially acceptable in men than women. Lastly, the collective evaluation and qualification of the artwork itself is gender biased as it favors men over women (Miller, 2016). Observing prominent Armenian women artists while keeping in mind these three obstacles, contributes to having a more critical approach when analyzing how some women were able to create a prominent name for themselves while others were not.

Miller referred to the work of the American sociologist Joan Acker to support her first point. According to Acker's studies, jobs, organizations and hierarchies are undeniably gendered based on her analyses of the "abstract worker" referred to in job descriptions and workplace policies. Acker concluded that a worker is expected to have minimal responsibility in procreation and with sufficient "control" over their emotions. These requirements lead to assume that the female candidate with menstruation, pregnancy and/or breast-feeding and the imaginary "emotional" nature, is unfitting, giving bases for exclusion (Acker, 1990, p.152). Not only are biological differences from the male body stigmatized and viewed as obstacles for any career success, but additional mythic characteristics are often attributed to the image of a female, making it even harder to "qualify" for a position. Miller argues that workplaces or careers which rely on the separation (and in part the sacrifice) of private life, advantage men over women since they assume less domestic or nurturing responsibilities. Clearly, the job of an artist does not fall into the category of traditional employment. Most of the artists are freelancers, contract workers or self-employed, yet the archetype of a successful artist is as masculinized as the one of an ideal worker (Miller, 2016, p. 5). "The ideal-typical artist is expected to prioritize artistic creation

above all else, and perform visible commitment to art as a “passion” or a “calling” (Miller, 2016, p. 6). The generalized statement is backed by a number of statistics proving the overrepresentation of men as artists, their higher pay and privilege when evaluated. Unlike non-artistic jobs, the work done by musicians or actors is often based on intense work on a project for a given period of time and a no less uncertain period of break in between these projects. This style of work expects its performing artists to be able to set their personal and family responsibilities aside, despite women being pressured to prioritize those over their careers. Miller adds that this is the reason many women artists made the deliberate decision to not have any children (Miller, 2016, pp. 5-8).

The author’s second argument takes us back to the notion of the ‘genius’ and how it is masculinized. In most if not all artistic fields, men are the ones that are described as geniuses. Even in female-dominated fields, including fashion or cooking, men are often accredited for a creative vision or artistry while women are more often praised for creating practicality rather than novelty. One of the possible reasons is the association of antisocial practices and at times aggressive behavior with the archetype of a genius. Elements that are viewed as essential for a man genius are surprising and even repulsive in women. Accordingly, acts of isolation from a society for the sake of diving into the creative process are interpreted as selfish or unruly (Miller, 2016, pp. 9-11).

Being an artist involves the dependency on recognition, be it from critics, media or friends. This leads to being dependent on publicists, promoters, art dealers or gallery directors in order to continuously prove the aesthetic value of their work. Unfortunately, art evaluation is also known to be gender biased. Examples of female writers publishing their work under a male pen name prove the point. “This perception bias is compounded because women are systematically

sanctioned for seeking attention, and may therefore be less active and enthusiastic in the self-promotion that is necessary to secure these positive evaluations” (Miller, 2016, pp. 11-12). Even after an artist’s death, families of a male artist are more likely to pursue the maintenance of his name rather than relatives of a dead female artist. No less relevant is the biased perception of successful women artists as manipulative figures, using their physical attractiveness as means for achievement, disregarding and devaluing their talent or skill (Miller, 2016, pp. 13-14).

When analyzing or simply observing the works of women artists while having Miller’s points in mind, I was able to better understand how given circumstances of the Soviet era possibly affected both their art and their career.

### **Women Within the Context of Soviet Armenian Society**

Having examined the general hardships women faced throughout art history and after observing global practices of canonical exclusion alongside the gendered nature of the term *genius*, I then referred to a chapter on the social identity of Armenian women to gradually localize my research. In her work, Svetlana A. Aslanyan (2005) introduces the political, economic and social rights of Armenian women before and during the Soviet era. The author brings up ways in which the Soviet power left a significant impact, radically changing the societal and family life of most Armenian women. Despite the benefits however, Aslanyan argues that the norms were far from what they labeled as gender equality and statistics come to prove the imbalance in pay and in the distribution of higher positions within the country. An interesting observation of the author is the evolution of Armenian society, where, similar to other Soviet countries, women became overloaded with work, balancing traditional domestic responsibilities with that of the work outside the home (Aslanyan, 2005, pp. 192-200).

Armenian law and policy-makers of the 20th century have put obvious effort alongside Western Armenian women, resulting in the Declaration of Armenian Women's Rights in 1991. The First Republic of Armenia (1918-1920) gave women the right to vote as well as to be elected to the highest government positions. The legal and constitutional rights of women became equal to those of men. At the same time, Armenian music, literature and arts acclaimed the image of an Armenian woman as a mother and protector of the family (Aslanyan, 2005, pp. 192-194).

With the rise of the Soviet Union came the pursuit of equal rights in work, education, social and economic life for both men and women. With the intention to engage women in paid labor, hiring of paid workers for domestic responsibilities including household tasks and childcare was being normalized. Marriages became independent from the church followed by the simplification of divorce. Most of the changes listed above were conflicting with the traditional practices and norms of Armenian society. "The plan was to create a new type of woman –Soviet woman– in contrast to the patriarchal model of passive, emotional, dependent, and self-sacrificing women" (Aslanyan, 2005, p. 194). Among the evident advancements was the legalization of abortion performed by a physician in 1920. Despite the progress, Aslanyan mentions Soviet gender equality as not real and in fact discriminatory, arguing that the "freedom" was there to contribute to the ideological propaganda. Women did get education and become professionals, yet top positions in the government or in parliament were held by men only. Despite this phenomenon being pointed at within the context of Soviet Armenia in Aslanyan's text, it is important to keep in mind that this issue was not unique to this country solely. Having received the same education, women would end up in low or middle class positions. In the Armenian context, most of the women were still taking on the responsibility of household duties and domestic practices, parallel to working outside the home. This double burden led to

dissatisfaction and negative attitudes towards equality among some people (Aslanyan, 2005, p. 196-198).

Whether or not the equality pursued by the Soviet government was a way to defraud the population, it is important to be informed on the political, economic and social rights of Armenian women artists when looking at their works.

### **Soviet Female Artists and Soviet Armenian Female Artists**

Narrowing down to female artists of the Soviet era and later focusing on only Armenian women, possible sources for research became extremely scarce. I then referred to online articles to study how the revolution affected female artists of the Soviet era. As mentioned above, changes applied in Soviet society included the improvement of educational opportunities for women. Even though fine art education was accessible for women long before the revolution, limitations in form of high cost and social class were eliminated. Women that did not come from wealthy families could now afford training at art academies. The purpose of art shifted however. Many soviet artists would not strive for the “universal language of liberation of humanity”, instead they would promote Socialism through a realistic, patriotic and uncritical style (Adams, 2019).

In a 2016 article, art critic, curator and feminist scholar, Susanna Gyulamiryan argues that despite art education becoming more widely available, the Academic school was established and led by men. Accordingly, the art of most female artists was created within the traditions of classical school, following the trends of male artists. In other words, women did not take part in deconstructive practices when coming across stereotypes in art or social life. Yet again, we see this paradigm of systemic patriarchal practices that have global echoes as well.



Armenian women artists came into view predominantly in the 1950s. This was the time the Armenian art scene got introduced to names such as Knarik Vardanyan, Yeranuhi and Mariam Aslamazyans, Armine Kalents, Lavina Bazhbeuk-Melikyan, Dekhdzanik Mkhitaryan, Qnarik Hovhannisyan, and others. Despite the significant success of some of these women, most of the Soviet Armenian art historiography makes no mention of any woman when claiming to present the “biggest” names of Armenian art history. A more particular example of selective inclusion is Nona Stepanyan’s 1985 book “Survey of Fine Art in Armenia”, that mentions not one female artist despite covering a time period from 1910 to 1980s. Progressive Armenian women artists would work around the contrast between feminine and masculine, but in a safe manner. No direct reference was made to feminism however. It was after the fall of the Soviet Union that female artists acted upon the lack of representation and recognition by being displayed in local galleries and institutions (Gyulamiryan, 2016).

With all these obstacles and limitations in their way, one only wonders how several Armenian women were still able to firmly establish their names. Eranuhi Aslamazyan and Mariam Aslamazyan are two of the very few Armenian women who received somewhat proper recognition for their work. The Aslamazyan sisters went against the traditional portrayal of women, by challenging the patriarchal Soviet Armenian society. Their works would question stereotypical ideas of women as “passive members of the society”(Khatchadourian, n.d.). Their careers lasted from 1922-1992, covering the whole USSR era. Their styles were rooted within socialist-realism as many of their pieces would promote the socialist ideology and would idealize the image of the Soviet state and its governing body. At the same time, it was through the nuanced use of imagery that the artists were able to include non-conventional ideas into their

artworks. Both Mariam and Eranuhi would often travel as unofficial cultural ambassadors to promote the Soviet Union, meeting various heads of state (Khatchadourian, n.d.).

Making a full circle and going back to Nochlin's and Pollock's texts, one can find the patterns that possibly led to the exceptional success of the sisters. Mariam and Eranuhi were born in a wealthy modern family where education was prioritized, regardless of their sex. Their father would often host renowned architects, archaeologists, artists, historians and linguists, having the children exposed to arts and humanities from an early age. They received their art education at the Alexandropol Painting School and later at the Artistic-Industrial College of Yerevan. As one can see evidently, the sisters had the privilege of growing up in a family where the need for education (especially art education) wasn't degraded because they were girls. Going back to Miller's text, we can also observe a possible reason behind the absence of family lives of the sisters. One of the most significant subjects of portrayal for Mariam and Eranuhi was the figure of mother, the creator (Khatchadourian, N, n.d.). Despite this admiration of the concept of maternity, none of the artists had a family of their own, leading to assume the possibility of them having chosen their careers over partners and/or children. History leads us to assume they would not have to face a similar dilemma if they were men.

Armine Galentz is another example of a renowned Armenian painter. Unfortunately, in her case as well, her success can also be partly attributed to her privilege of being the wife of the famous Armenian painter Haroutiun Galentz (Tavukciyan, 2022). Galentz's case is also unique due to the fact that her work was often overshadowed by her husband's. Armine herself, classified her paintings as never equal to those of Haroutiun, which is described in more detail in her memoirs, titled *Forgive Me Haroutiun*, from 1997. None of the above is intended to devalue the talent, effort and time that these women had dedicated to obtain their level of proficiency. On

the contrary, I want to highlight the underlying pattern of dependency on the male figure, one way or another. This involuntary reliance on men ascribed by the society, which often led to the damage of self worth, are issues and stand among the most common characteristics shared by many successful female artists. From a financially supported family to the presence of a prominent male artist in the family, these are all privileges the absence of which would probably leave these women unknown, regardless of their talent or skill.

### **Research Question**

20th-century Armenian history of art is predominantly composed of male artists and so is the name list of the artistic “geniuses”. Accordingly, the National Gallery of Armenia, being one of the most significant narrators of this history today, exhibits primarily art created by men among its permanently displayed collection. A cursory research, on the other hand, shows the existence of many Armenian female artists (of the 20th century) who created alongside the men represented at the Gallery. The majority of contemporary Armenian society is unfortunately unable to name Armenian female painters, sculptors or filmmakers. Were these names deliberately erased or did women artists simply not “fit” into the canon? What part did the Soviet era play in this paradigm and how does that cannon stay relevant in post-Soviet Armenia?

### **Methodology**

To answer the central question of my research, I naturally faced follow-up questions that broke up into more and more questions. In order to find the answer, I decided to apply a chronological method of research. I first examined the possible origin of general gender discrimination in arts and then progressed to the 20th century and narrowed it down to Armenia with an emphasis on Soviet-Armenia. This chronological style allowed me to reflect the well-studied gender imbalance in arts on Armenian art history, and thus find parallels. For my

research, I primarily referred to literature and accompanied it with some numerical data retrieved from the online database of the National Gallery of Armenia.

Working with the topic of art, I decided to conduct qualitative research. The only reason I wanted to retrieve numerical data was with the intention to ascertain the presence of gender imbalance in one of the biggest narrators of the country's art history. I decided to study the name list of the permanently exhibited Armenian artists in the National Gallery of Armenia. The museum is the biggest in the country and holds the largest collection of Armenian art. Despite my initial desire and effort to receive the necessary data from the Gallery, my attempts were unsuccessful. Even though the director of the Gallery originally consented to provide me with the list of permanently displayed Armenian artists, it got postponed for weeks, eventually leading to the point where my countless phone calls would be left unanswered. At the very beginning, I was told that the Gallery was taking action towards updating the list of artists, with the intention to change the gender imbalance. Whether this was the case or not will be known in the future, yet it still doesn't justify their act of neglecting my request. For that reason, I turned to their online database to create an approximate idea of the ratio of women to men artists. As expected, the archive of the museum was predominantly comprised of men (National Gallery of Armenia, n.d.). Even though there are hundreds of artworks of female artists preserved in the archives, the Gallery's website mentions almost no women in its text on the evolution of Armenian art. Words including *classics* and *masters* are all attributed to men, including Martiros Saryan, Haroutiun Galentz, Vahram Gayfejian, Ervand Kochar and many other male artists (National Gallery of Armenia, n.d.).

With this research, I aim to determine and identify possible reasons of the evidently existing discrimination in the way Armenian art history is displayed, through the prism of

existing literature on the global issue of the lack of “great” women in arts. As expected, literature made up the biggest portion of data for my research. When reading about the global problem, there is a rich array of existing primary sources to choose from, including books, essays and articles. Unfortunately, this was not the case when I began studying the issue on the Armenian scale. Though the female role in the Soviet era, including the one of Armenian women, is much written on, when I narrowed my subject down to the role of Armenian female artists of the 20th century, the results were cut down, leaving me with only a few articles at hand.

Looking back at history through literature and studying the lived experiences of Armenian women before and during the Soviet period helped me explain the lack of their representation in arts. Knowledge about the creation and application of certain laws alongside the political, economic and social rights of Armenian women of the 20th century helped me compose the environment in which female artists created. When addressing the question on how some Armenian women managed to become renowned artists, visual research made a big contribution. By examining the subject matter of the works of some acclaimed Armenian female artists I tried to discover the possible reasons behind their success in getting closer to the canon than the majority of their fellow female creators. With that being said, I turned to qualitative research methodology because of the contribution that it would provide with its visual and textual research throughout the process of addressing my central question.

### **Research Creation**

Art has always been an organic medium for self-expression for me. Growing up in a family of artists, I have had the privilege to receive professional guidance and critical evaluation from an early age. With my research being entirely based on the concept of art, I had a subconscious assurance that I had to have my own creative contribution to the project.

Accordingly, instead of presenting my findings in a solely textual form, I decided to speak through my own art. Growing more and more interested in digital forms of art creation in the past few years, I was also sure I would avoid the use of traditional mediums for this project. After months of brainstorming, I chose to create a digital art installation in a physical space.

As the outcome of my research, I discovered that there is no lack of 20th century Armenian female artists. The issue was in the gender-based selective representation that has been practiced for decades, and still is in contemporary Armenian society. The issue itself is the outcome of systematic and institutionalized patriarchal practices. Thus, I referred to the multimodal medium of digital art and combined both visual and audio elements to create a memorable and impactful piece that would spread awareness on the subject matter. By doing so, I hope to have had my small contribution in informing and giving a platform for the discourse of underrepresentation of Armenian female artists.

### **Installation Launch**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCS5AK6BOy8>

### **Installation**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8de2wALN00>

### **Artist Statement**

The primary purpose of my art installation is to share my research findings. To do it not only effectively, but also in an emotionally impactful manner, I decided to put my audience in my shoes. I created a space where the viewer would unintentionally start questioning and brainstorming over the ideas that I came across myself at the start of my research.

Are there many Armenian women artists? If not, then why? If yes, then where? I wanted to ignite this discourse within every viewer. To achieve this, I created a character that directly

addresses these questions to the audience. The character herself is a collective image of an Armenian female artist and is created right in front of the viewers' eyes. As twenty five individual fragments of actual paintings of Armenian female artists gradually appear on the screen alongside with the artists' names, a silhouette of a female profile is composed.

The twenty five names include: Bejanyan Serine, Hovsepyan Nora, Gabrielyan Ada, Aslamazyan Mariam, Avetisyan Laura, Boyajyan Aida, Isayan Gohar, Beqaryan Seda, Martirosyan Evgine, Muradyan Hripsime, Gyulikevkhyan Nana, Karapetyan Varditer, Papikyan Siranush, Khachaturyan Gayane, Khanamiryan Lida, Gevorgyan Siranush, Bajbeuk-Melikian Lavinya, Asatryan Nelli, Danduryan Anastasia, Zardaryan Anahit, Msryan Ofelya, Hayrapetyan Vergine, Loris-Melikova Vera, Aslamazyan Eranuhi, Galikyan Violeta.

The silhouette is a literal unification of their works, coming together to be seen and later heard. As the image gets complete, a few seconds of visual and auditory suspense leads to the climax, where the silhouette unexpectedly comes to life. She raises her head and starts asking questions from the first person with an echoing voice. "Do I exist, or not? If not, then why don't I?". The echoes are voices of individual women, instead of the repetition of the same one. This is yet another reminder of the big number of female artists that have been excluded from the art history of Armenia. The character concludes with the assertive "I do exist". This closing line is a hint to the answer of my central research question, concluding that the issue is not in the lack of female artists, but in preservation of their names and works.

### **Reflections on Process**

With the outcome of my research in hand, I had an urge to try and shed light on as many names as possible. Seeing the unjust gender-based selective representation, I wanted to have my tiny contribution towards balancing it. My initial idea was to have people randomly pick names

of artists and stick them on a blank canvas with a frame. With this idea of interactive installation, I hoped to make people familiar with these women and their works. After a few sessions of brainstorming, I realized how much bigger my imprint can be if I inform people on the issue, instead of sharing a limited number of names that would most likely be forgotten afterwards. Accordingly, my objective shifted from uncovering the names to initiating a discourse on the relevant issue of underrepresentation in the contemporary society of Armenia.

### **Epilogue**

A few days before the launch of my installation, as I was finalizing the project I had a memorable conversation with my little sister. Seeing me work on the project, record my mother's voice for it and spend hours editing, my eleven-year-old sister grew curious and finally approached to fulfill her curiosity. "Are you sure mom's voice fits well to this face?". She was not only critical of my creative choices, but also wanted to learn more about the meaning, to my surprise. At that very moment I realized how I have neglected to initiate the conversation myself. After rewinding the draft version of the video and pausing it, I began telling her about my experience from choosing the topic to doing the research. As much as I would simplify my language, I made sure to mention all the intricacies I had discovered. After giving her the background, I played the video and she asked, "why is she saying those words?" I was very happy to find her genuinely interested and willing to understand my work, to say the least. Her face reflected deliberate effort to understand my words. The conversation lasted for five minutes, yet made an impact she will probably unfold more in the years to come. Showing my little sister



the effort I put into voicing about discrimination against women made me realize the importance of the work I was doing.

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